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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study empirically the experience of love in adult men and women. A Q-sort was developed by having independent raters classify over 300 statements about experiences in love as reflecting: (1) one of six modes of love--affective, cognitive, behavioral, verbal, physical, or fantasy; and (2) one of three directions of exchange in love--receiving, giving, or sharing. Nominated to participate were 12 married and 12 unmarried couples from four age groups (adolescent, young adult, middle-aged adult, and older adult). Analysis of variance revealed significant effects for Mode, Direction, Mode X Direction, Age X Mode, Couples X Direction, and Couples X Sex X Mode ($p<01$) and Age X Mode X Direction ($p<05$). There were no effects for sex or marital status. Results indicated that there is considerable individual variability in the experience of love, and that there are notable differences as well as similarities between the generations in their experiences of love. Statistical tests revealed that sexual intimacy was significantly less characteristic of older adult love compared to that for other age groups and that the tendency to idealize (fantasy) was more characteristic of adolescent and older adult love. The importance of the affective, cognitive, behavioral and verbal modes of love did not differ significantly between the age groups. (Author/SE)

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AGE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LOVE IN ADULTHOOD*

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The purpose of this paper is to present research findings on one of the most talked about but probably least understood areas of human experience, that of love between adult men and women. All of us have a lot of ideas about love, but we really know very little about it. For example, we ask ourselves "how much" we are in love. But is love a question of quantity or quality? Another notion is that love is only for the young. Does the saying, "Young and in love, old and lonely" really reflect reality? We also say that men love differently from women and that married love is somehow more "mature" than unmarried love. What we think you'll find interesting about the findings of this research is that they challenge some of our common notions about what love between adult men and women is like.

Specifically, the purpose of this research was to study empirically (1) the qualitative dimensions of the experience of love in adulthood and (2) their relative importance as a function of age, sex and marital status. For the purposes of this research we defined love as a construct describing the state of a relationship between a man and a woman that can be characterized by particular patterns of exchange involving affective, cognitive, behavioral, verbal, physical and fantasy components.

METHODS

Briefly, what we did was to develop a Q-sort of 144 statements describing a wide variety of possible experiences that might be experienced by someone in love. This was done by having eight raters independently classify over

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300 statements according to an apriori system. Each statement was rated to reflect (1) one of six possible modes of love -- affective, cognitive, behavioral, verbal, physical or fantasy, and (2) one of three directions of exchange in love -- receiving, giving or sharing. Agreement between raters (at least six out of eight) resulted in a set of 144 statements: eight statements for each mode X direction combination.

An example of an affective statement would be one such as: "I feel complete because of him." This statement would also reflect a receiving direction of exchange in love. A cognitive and also giving statement would be one like: "I think he makes good decisions." A behavioral and sharing statement would be one like: "Doing unpleasant tasks is more fun if we do them together." A verbal and receiving statement: "He finds it easy to confide in me." A physical and sharing statement would be one like: "Our sexual relationship is both physically powerful and tender." Finally, a fantasy and giving statement would be one like: "I constantly dream and imagine what the future holds for us."

Each member of 24 couples, completed the Q-sort in terms of his or her current experience of being in love. Couples were divided into four age groups: an adolescent group (mean age, 19 years); young adults (mean age, 29 years); middle aged adults (mean age, 50); and older adults (mean age, 73 years). Half the couples in each age group were married and half were not. Couples were nominated by people who knew them well and who described them as being "very much in love."

RESULTS

An analysis of variance was performed to test the system used to classify the experience of love into hypothesized components and to examine the effects of age, sex and marital status on the way love is experienced.

The independent variables in the analysis were marital status (2 levels), age (4 levels), couples (3 levels), sex (2 levels), mode of love (6 levels), and direction of exchange in love (3 levels). All independent variables were fully crossed except couples which was treated as nested within marital status and age. Partners' responses could not be considered independent of one another and sex was therefore treated as a repeated measure. The eight statements reflecting each mode X direction combination were treated as replications. The dependent variable was the rating a subject gave a statement on the Q-sort distribution, and could range from (0) to (10). For any one subject, the mean over all 144 statements was 5.0.

Table 1 shows the results of the analysis of variance. There were significant effects at the .01 level for mode, direction of exchange. mode X direction of exchange, age X mode, couples X mode, couples X direction and sex X couples X mode and at the .05 level for age X mode X direction. No significant main effects were found for sex or marital status. The results showed that our Q-sort can be reliably used by subjects, with individual reliability coefficients for subjects ranging from .90 to .94.

Dimensions of the Experience of Love

Table 2 shows the mean scores for the various modes, directions and mode X direction combinations. Post hoc comparisons for the modes of love by means of Duncan's multiple range procedure indicate that, over all subjects, mean scores for fantasy and for behavioral are significantly lower ($p<.01$) than those for cognitive, physical, affective, and verbal which do not differ significantly from each other. The implication is that the mind, the body, the heart and the spoken word are all equally important to love and that behaviors and fantasy are relatively less important.

Post hoc tests for direction of exchange reveal that the mean score for sharing is significantly higher ($p<.01$) than those for receiving or giving which do not differ significantly from each other. The implication is that love is most generally experienced as a mutual and shared exchange. Looking at the relative importance of the six modes of love for each of the three directions of exchange, it appears that more aspects of love are important in sharing love compared to giving or receiving love. Also, whereas the affective component is seen as the most characteristic aspect of sharing and receiving love, it is less characteristic ($p<.01$) of giving love when compared to the cognitive and physical modes. The implication of these findings is that the experience of love is complex and that love is a "many splendored thing." In contrast to the narrow definitions of love as an "attitude", an "affectional feeling", a "drive", or a "need state", the definition of love offered here seems better able to capture the complexity, breadth and all consuming character of love.

Age and the Experience of Love

Significant age differences were found in the experience of love (see Table 3). Age differences were found for the fantasy and physical modes of love, whereas the mean scores for the affective, cognitive, behavioral and verbal modes did not differ significantly between the age groups. The mean score for physical was significantly lower for older adults ($p<.05$), while that for fantasy was significantly higher ($p<.05$) for both adolescents and older adults.

Figure 1 shows the mean scores for each age group for each of the six modes of love. Interestingly, a curvilinear relationship emerged for the physical and sexual component in the love relationship in relation to age. The mean scores on the physical component increased steadily from adolescence

through young adulthood to middle age, but then dropped abruptly as an important descriptor of the love relationship for older adults. General slowing of the nervous system as well as decreased physical vigor and strength in later life is one possible explanation for the reduced importance of physical intimacy among older adults. Another explanation is that older adults conform to the asexual stereotype often ascribed to the aged. What is interesting is that older people tended to see emotional and physchological intimacy as being most characteristic of their experience of love. The implication is that some kind of intimacy is essential to love, and if one kind of intimacy is no longer possible, another kind will develop.

Hoping, wishing, dreaming, and idealizing appear to be more characteristic of love for adolescents and older adults, whereas young adults and the middle aged apparently tend to be more realistic about the strengths and weaknesses of the loved one. For the adolescents, fantasy may be important because of their greater exposure to the romantic theme, because responsibility is not associated with love for this age group, or because fantasy is used to fill in their lack of knowledge about their loved one. The fantasies of older adults, however, may possibly be the result of "defensive" or "blind" forgetting. In the case of "defensive" forgetting, there may be a need to see the relationship as perfect in order to justify a lifetime spent in it. In the case of "blind" forgetting, there may be a selective remembering of only the good times in the love relationship. A final possibility is simple that of generational differences, that is, the experience of love among these older adults may have always had a good deal of fantasy in it. To summarize, the findings suggest that there are notable differences as well as similarities between the generations in the experience of love. The findings importantly suggest that love is not only for the young and that although older people may love differently in some respects, they are no less in love.

Sex, Marital Status, Couples and the Experience of Love

The lack of significant differences between the sexes and between the married and unmarried are notable negative findings. Contrary to the stereotype, women do not seem to be more emotional about love than men, nor are men any more likely than women to experience love in its physical or sexual aspects. Also, contrary to our stereotypes, the married are no more likely to be more realistic and mature, or less idealistic, about love than unmarried people.

Partners in a couple were found to be more like each other than like other couples of their same age and marital status in the way they experience love. Beyond the fact that partners of a couple are more like each other than they are like anyone else, they do perceive the same love relationship differently. These findings suggest that although there are similarities between individuals, love is a highly individual experience.

Implications of the Research

First, the research challenges the notion that love is a mysterious and elusive phenomenon which cannot be studied scientifically. Second, it challenges the notion that love is simply a matter for the heart. Third, men and women do not appear to experience love differently and married love is not somehow qualitatively different from unmarried love. Fourth, the research suggests that there is not just one way to love. And fifth, contrary to commonly held belief, love is not only for the young. The finding that love is different at different ages suggests the importance, both theoretically and practically, of taking a developmental approach to the scientific study of love. In conclusion, the findings of this research seem not only to contradict many of our common notions about this elusive phenomenon, but also suggest that love may not be quite as elusive and unexplainable as many seem to think.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance Summary Table

Source	Error Term	df	F
Mode (M)	C x M	5	30.10**
Direction (D)	C x D	2	28.51**
M x D	C x M x D	10	15.54**
Marital Status (U)	C	1	
Age (A)	C	3	
Sex (S)	C x S	1	
U x A	C	3	
U x S	C x S	1	
A x S	C x S	3	
U x M	C x M	5	.60
A x M	C x M	15	2.73**
S x M	C x S x M	5	.69
U x D	C x D	2	1.42
A x D	C x D	6	.85
S x D	C x S x D	2	.15
Couples (C)	R	16	
U x A x S	C x S	2	
U x A x M	C x M	15	.72
U x S x M	C x S x M	5	.47
A x S x M	C x S x M	15	.55
U x A x D	C x D	6	.94
U x S x D	C x S x D	2	.08
A x S x D	C x S x D	6	.98
U x M x D	C x M x D	10	1.75
A x M x D	C x M x D	30	1.56*
S x M x D	C x S x M x D	10	.58
C x S	R	16	
C x M	R	80	3.56**
C x D	R	32	1.92**
U x A x S x M	C x S x M	15	.41
U x A x S x D	C x S x D	6	.64
U x A x M x D	C x M x D	30	.82
U x S x M x D	C x S x M x D	10	.81
A x S x M x D	C x S x M x D	30	1.01
C x S x M	R	80	1.83**
C x S x D	R	32	1.03
C x M x D	R	160	1.00
U x A x S x M x D	C x S x M x D	30	1.18
C x S x M x D	R	160	.90
Replications Within Cells (R)		6048	

**p<.01
*p<.05

Table 2

Mean Scores for Mode, Direction and Mode X Direction*

Mode	Direction			
	Receiving	Giving	Sharing	
Affective	5.4	4.8	6.2	5.4
Cognitive	5.3	5.5	5.6	5.5
Behavioral	4.7	4.6	4.3	4.5
Verbal	5.1	4.8	5.9	5.2
Physical	4.7	5.5	6.1	5.4
Fantasy	3.3	4.1	4.2	3.9
	4.8	4.9	5.4	5.0

*Results of post hoc tests using Duncan's multiple range procedure:

Mode	F B VAPC
Direction	RG S
Mode X Direction	
Receiving	F PB VCA
Giving	F BVA CP
Sharing	FB CVPA

Mean scores are ordered from lowest to highest and scores which are underlined do not differ significantly from each other. The letters A, C, B, V, P and F refer to the affective cognitive, behavioral, verbal, physical and fantasy modes respectively. The letters R, G, and S refer to the receiving, giving and sharing directions of exchange respectively.

Table 3

Mean Scores for Mode for Each Age Group*

Age Group	Mode					
	Affective	Cognitive	Behavioral	Verbal	Physical	Fantasy
Adolescent	5.3	5.1	4.8	5.1	5.5	4.2
Young Adult	5.4	5.7	4.3	5.5	5.8	3.4
Middle Aged Adult	5.5	5.6	4.5	5.0	5.9	3.4
Older Adult	5.5	5.6	4.6	5.3	4.6	4.4

*Results of post hoc tests using Duncan's multiple range procedure:

Physical OA A YA MA

Fantasy YA MA A OA

Mean scores are ordered from lowest to highest and scores that are underlined do not differ significantly from each other. The letters A, YA, MA and OA refer to the adolescent, young adult, middle aged adult and older adult age groups, respectively.

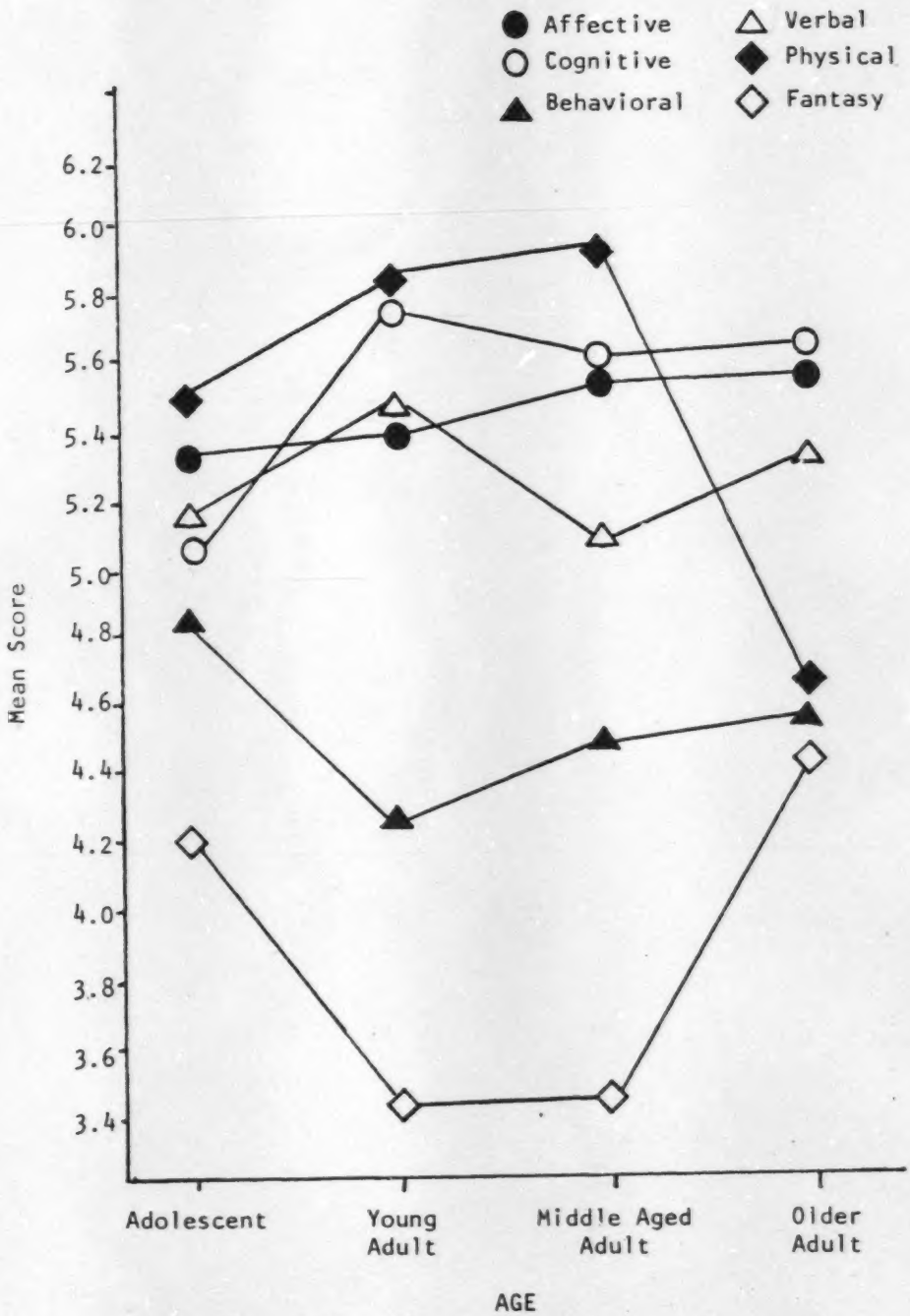

Figure 1

Mean Scores by Age for Mode of Love